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**L'interprétation des noms grecs et latins d'animaux illustrée par le cas du zoonyme *seps-sēps***

Liliane Bodson. Brussels: Académie royale de Belgique, 2009. 368 pages. ISBN 0378-7893 and ISBN 978-2-80231-02631 (paperback)

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The natural history of the past can be tantalizingly elusive. At a remove of only a few hundred years, evidence that seems plentiful and accessible at first glance, turns out on closer examination to be opaque or (perhaps more dangerously) misleading. Any assumption of stability can be problematic. Not only do populations of flora and fauna shift in response to changes in environment, anthropogenic and otherwise, but the language that describes them is similarly mutable. A single word can shift its boundaries over time, becoming either more or less inclusive: thus the Old English “deor” referred to animals in general (like its cognate “das Tier” in modern German), but in the course of the medieval period it became restricted to members of the family Cervidae. Or it can experience more radical change. In modern taxonomic nomenclature, “felis” refers exclusively to members of the cat family, but it would be a mistake to transfer that understanding to ancient Roman texts, where it is more likely to refer to one or another of the Mustelidae. Conversely, a single organism can have many names—one reason that compilers of zoological compendia, both before and after Linnaeus, have frequently felt the need to begin their entries with lists of synonyms.

The more remote such evidence is from us, in either time or place, the more difficult it inevitably is to interpret—and the more important it is to extract all the information we can. As Isidore of Seville theorizes in the epigraph of Liliane Bodson’s learned inquiry, “To ignore the names of things is to condemn them to being

unknowable.” [My translation of Bodson’s French paraphrase of Isidore’s Latin.] In L’interprétation des noms grecs et latins d’animaux illustrée par le cas du zoonyme *seps-sēps*, Bodson concretely illustrates both the challenges and the rewards of the scholarly effort to through ancient names. She focuses on an example that is philologically single, although zoologically multiple. The Greek root seps-sēps refers to putrefaction, and its use as a zoonym was derived from the classical medical vocabulary. Bodson points out that it provided labels for four kinds of animals that are, at least from the perspective of modern taxonomy, very different: snakes (specifically vipers), lizards (especially skinks), centipedes, and spiny caterpillars. But from an anthropocentric, and especially from a medical or iological (in ancient usage, iology was the study of animal venoms) perspective, they shared an important characteristic. All were or were thought to be poisonous.

At the core of this book is Bodson’s exhaustive survey of Greek, Roman, and Byzantine texts (that is, from a period of well over a millennium), some of which are scientific or medical in orientation, others more philosophical or literary. (Of course the evidence for zoonyms is by definition exclusively written, but where possible Bodson supports her conclusions with evidence from art and archaeozoology.) The impressive scope of her research is immediately clear. It is laid out in a table that supplements the introductory overview. It lists 31 different authors or texts, specifying the type or types of *seps* animal that each discusses and the number of occurrences for each. Subsequently she devotes a separate chapter to each type of animal, and these more detailed discussions are also accompanied by tables that very usefully distill the analysis.

Due to the general issues mentioned at the beginning of this review, it was not possible to establish a consistent referent for any of the zoonyms. Each author tended to use *seps* to refer to animals that existed in his particular time and place, so that the snakes and lizards observed by Aristotle might not have been exactly the same as those observed by Nicander or Pliny. (There are numerous modern examples of similar polysemy—for example, the very different robins of Europe and North America.) But Bodson carefully sifts her evidence to determine, as far as is possible, which particular modern species were in the mind each writer. She offers detailed analyses of the evidence offered by each text, so that the reader can follow along as she matches the animals it mentions with those designated in modern binomial nomenclature, or as she concludes that there is insufficient basis to make such a match.

The combination of expertises—zoological, historical, and linguistic--necessary to undertake research of this kind is extremely rare. It yields rewards that are similarly trans-disciplinary. Information about the distribution of species in antiquity contributes to the scientific understanding of ancient Mediterranean ecosystems. Discussion of animal poisons provides insight into Greek and Roman medicine, and also into attitudes toward some aspects of the natural world. And, since, then as now, animals figured importantly in human imagination and experience, their representation often illuminates human culture and society. More than thirty years ago the classicist Herbert Hoffman urged his colleagues to pay closer and more literal attention to the animals portrayed on Greek vases, which they were inclined to view as mere decoration: “their occurrence on the vases can be demonstrated to represent a complex taxonomic system which in turn is constitutive of Greek social reality.” [“In the Wake of Beazley: Prolegomena to an

Anthropological Study of Greek Vase Painting.” From a talk delivered at the Collège de France in 1978; available online at [http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/helios/fachinfo/www/arch/hephaistos/Hephaistos\\_Hoffmann.pdf](http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/helios/fachinfo/www/arch/hephaistos/Hephaistos_Hoffmann.pdf) . I am grateful to Karen Caines of Oxford University for showing me this article.] The mission of this journal is very similar to the program urged by Hoffman, although, for the most part, it has a more restricted and recent chronological range. But there is nothing inevitable about this limitation, as Liliane Bodson’s erudite and illuminating work demonstrates.